

Doğan Gürpınar. *Conspiracy Theories in Turkey: Conspiracy Nation.* London and New York: Routledge. 2020. 112 pages. ISBN 9780429020360.

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‘Covid-19 is a conspiracy organized by the great powers (China, Israel, the US or Bill Gates)’.¹ Thus, says one third of the respondents of a survey conducted by Bozkurt in Turkey in April 2020. This is, indeed, an example of conspiracy theories flourishing especially in times of uncertainties. These theories explain the causes of an event or circumstances in relation to a secret plan by some internal or external enemies. No matter they are true or false, they shape people’s perception of politics. In Turkey’s political culture, they are significant repertoire for explaining political, social and economic transformations. Despite that, for a very long time, the academic world ignored them because it is believed that people often made their choices on a rational and predictable basis. Given that, Doğan Gürpınar’s book is a valuable attempt to demonstrate the formulation of conspiracies in Turkish politics.

The book is a five-chapter monograph included in a series edited by P. Knight and M. Butter. Chapter two and three are based upon Gürpınar’s other works in Turkish and English. Throughout the book, Gürpınar analyzes Turkish conspiracy theories from a cultural-historical perspective and contextualizes them in relation to Turkey’s intellectual history. Considering the mushrooming of the literature on Turkish nationalism and political culture, the book does a good job in presenting the historical universe of Turkish conspiratorial thinking from the Late Ottoman Empire of the 19th century on. The historical continuum helps the reader insert everything into an intellectual framework. Gürpınar’s most significant argument is that conspiracy theories should not always be associated with extreme political ideas that persuade uneducated masses. This aspect makes the topic highly significant not only to explore politics in the past but also people’s political choices in future.

Although Gürpınar makes an intricate analysis through various examples, the book is lacking in some key areas. Firstly, except for a brief reference to P. Knight, T. Melley and M. Fenster in a very short Introduction part, it does not present a theoretical basis. The readers, therefore, are not provided any tools about the definition of conspiracy theory and the significance or insignificance of the truth of conspiracies. In connection to that, the author never explains what he means by the title “Conspiracy Nation,” which is itself an ambitious and interesting title that needs to be elaborated

1 Sayın, Özgür; Bozkurt, Veyssel. 2021. ‘Sociology of Coronavirus Conspiracies in Turkey: Who Believes and Why?’. In Bozkurt, Veyssel; Dawes, Glenn; Gülerce, Hakan and Westebroek, Patricia (eds.). *The Societal Impacts of COVID-19: A Transnational Perspective*. Istanbul: Istanbul University Press. 79–91. Here: p. 84.

on. Due to the lack of a theoretical framework, except the last chapter, it is also unclear why readers should know about conspiracy theories in Turkey. For example, is it because there is a relationship between the prevalence of conspiracy theories in a given country and democratization? The answer is not dealt with sufficiently although Gürpınar mentions Turkey's recent experience of a recent 'conspiratorial turn' (p. 2) and the authoritarian governments' need for 'moral superiority and legitimacy' (p. 77) in the last chapter. Second, methodology and level of analysis are not clear. Gürpınar states he is looking at conspiratorial rhetoric at both a state and a popular level (p. 2). This is a brilliant strategy, but he never mentions his understanding of what 'popular' is. Most probably he has unofficial means circulating conspiracy theories in mind. However, this could only be discovered only after reading through the examples in the book. Besides, the author does not clearly explain why he chose these particular intellectuals or popular cultural examples. The book lacks a systematic presentation of popular and state level sources. Chapter I does not include a popular source. The same point is also valid for comparisons. There are parts in which the author attempts to situate Turkey in a larger context with references to the US, England (p. 1) and the Middle East (p. 74). This level of comparison, however, is not enough given the author's brief references to the increasing role of conspiratorial thinking as a tool of nation-state which lost its capacity to impose monolithic identities. The readers would expect more. Therefore, the book fails to insert Turkey into a global framework. All these bring to mind the ambiguity of the intended audience. Students of Turkish history and politics may not be satisfied due the lack of a systematic analysis. On the other hand, the prose consisting of rich but at the same time descriptive examples tends to be quite dense for the general audience. Thus, unfortunately, the author misses the chance of making a thorough analysis and leaves the readers completely unguided in the limitless universe of Turkish conspiracy theories.

In the first chapter, Gürpınar draws a broad historical scheme of Turkish conspiratorial setting. While doing this, he refers to what he calls 'master narrative', that is the official and foundational political discourse that constitutes a significant ground for dominant conspiracy theories. Westernization in the 19th century, traumas around the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and territorial losses in the 20th century, pro-Americanism in the 1950s, the rise of socialism in the 1970s and suppression of the left are the main events and processes shaped conspiratorial thinking according to the author. This, however, is a very brief historical account with many missing points. For example, although he provides a very elaborate account of the late Ottoman Empire, the 1930s, when the official discourse of Kemalism was marked with centralization of power by the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP) is almost non-existent in the book. During this period, the state elite formulated the Turkish History Thesis which argued that Turks were of a great and superior race established many civilizations including the European one. This understanding also formed the discourses of 'us' vs 'them' and prepared the legitimizing ground for conspiracy theories. Gürpınar does not mention this thesis either. Also, the reader is not informed about repressive state policies towards Kurds in the same period. Gürpınar could have applied his fresh perspective more in his analysis of conspiracy theories about Muslim minorities. In this

regard, a series of official congresses and publications for the affirmation of the History Thesis could be utilized in connection to their contribution to the conspiratorial setting. Besides, Gürpınar does not dwell on the 1940s. Pan-Turkism which gained pace during the Second World War was significant in enriching the conspiratorial setting and also nurturing the official discourse by providing a racist depository to the conspiratorial minds. Thus, Gürpınar's conspiratorial universe remains incomplete.

The second chapter presents Islamist conspiracy theories against Westernization between the late 19th century and the 1960s. Gürpınar tells about anti-semitic arguments of various intellectuals such as Rıza Nur and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. He also provides several cover pages of the different issues of an aggressive rightist journal named *Fedai*. It would be better, if he could have incorporated *Fedai* in his analysis. Besides, Gürpınar ignores the Korean war and Cyprus issue and how they might have contributed to the formation of conspiracy theories.

The third chapter is on neo-nationalism, a version of Kemalism emerged as a response to the rise of Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in early 2000s. Gürpınar refers to conspiracies reproduced by popular novels and TV programs. The freshest part of the chapter rests on Gürpınar's interpretation of environmental and health-related conspiracy theories (pp. 53–55). This could be a subject of further study in addition to conspiracy theories revolving around Covid-19 and vaccines. Besides, Gürpınar does not clarify some concepts such as 'Kemalist upbringing' of 'mainstream secular middle class' that he mentions while describing the atmosphere the conspiracies were persuasive (p. 48). It is also not clear why Gürpınar mentions American right-wing and their conspiracies about Obama (p. 51). These problems emerge probably because the chapter was mostly based his earlier book, *Ulusalçılık*² and so was not revised well enough to be considered as a part of a whole book. In parallel to that, there are some other editorial problems such as missing subjects in some sentences. His analysis, then, becomes opaque at many points.

In the fourth chapter, Gürpınar mentions the deep state discourse and its contribution to the formulation of conspiracy theories. He refers to popular level sources, too. In this regard, the chapter is partially a repetition of the works of L.K. Yanık,³ B.E. Çetin,⁴ V. Yücel⁵ and J. Carney.⁶ Some points of the author are, again, unclear. For example, about historical drama *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, he says, '...this series was seen by its

2 2011. *Ulusalçılık: İdeolojik Önderlik ve Takipçileri*. İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi.

3 "Those Crazy Turks" that Got Caught in the 'Metal Storm': Nationalism in Turkey's Best Seller Lists'. EUI Working Papers, RSCAS 2008/4. URL: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/8002> (accessed 30 January 2022).

4 2015. *The Paramilitary Hero on Turkish Television: A Case Study on Valley of the Wolves*. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

5 2014. *Kabramann Yolculuğu: Mitik Erkeklik ve Suç Draması*. İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları.

6 2018. 'Resur(e)cting a Spectacular Hero: *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey'. *Review of Middle East Studies*. 52.1. 93–114.

audience as a documentary instructing historical reality' (pp. 66–67). This comment had to be scientifically grounded.

In the last chapter, Gürpınar refers to both popular and state level sources to explain how AKP uses conspiracy theories to legitimize its rule. This is the core chapter of the book that connects the Turkish example with authoritarianism. This perspective had to be provided earlier in the book. The most significant contribution of the chapter is that the enemy was no longer an easily identifiable one, but instead 'a diffuse, nebulous, obscure and omnipresent one' (p. 77). The chapter, however, is still incomplete because Gürpınar does not mention conspiracy theories revolving around the July 15th coup attempt.

To conclude, despite its shortcomings the book is not only informative but also though-provoking. Similar to other recent works,⁷ it will be of interest to a broad range of readers who are interested in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. But the framework it presents needs to be complemented with additional sources on history and politics of Turkey.

- 7 De Medeiros, Julian. 2018. *Conspiracy Theory in Turkey: Politics and Protest in the Age of Post-Truth*. New York: IB Tauris; Sağlam, Erol. 2020. 'What to do with conspiracy theories?: Insights from contemporary Turkey'. *Anthropology Today*. 36.5. 18–21; 2021. Sağlam, Erol. 2021. 'Taking the matter into your own hands: ethnographic insights into societal violence and the reconfigurations of the state in contemporary Turkey'. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. 21.2. 213–30.